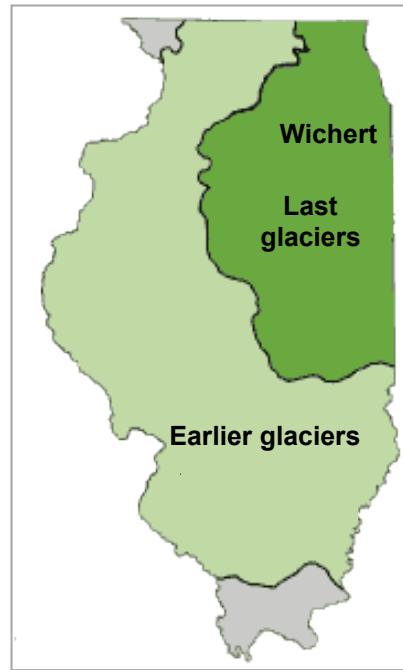


2 - Putting Down Roots in the Soil

The fertile soil that produced abundant crops for our family members was created over countless millennia, primarily by advancing and receding glacial ice that covered most of the region that would become Illinois (right). More than 12,000 years ago, the last of the glaciers covering the area melted and receded, leaving a swampy marsh dotted with wooded knolls and sandy high ground.

As far as can be determined, Indian tribes who arrived about 12,000 years ago built their camps on the high ground where they fished and hunted soon-to-be extinct mammoth and mastodon. To this day, arrowheads used by these Indians occasionally are found buried in the soil.

As the glaciers thawed and the climate warmed, new species of plants and animals became part of the ecosystem of the region, including deciduous trees, deer, and bears. Over time, the soil beneath the swampy waters became rich in nutrients deposited by decaying plants, fish, and wildlife.



The first settlers in the area represented diverse ethnic origins, including French, French Canadian, German, English, and Irish. In 1868, French immigrant Pierre Bonvallet and his four sons produced hundreds of tons of grapes on the land. Eventually they branched out into a successful wine-making business. In 1898, however, the family was forced to discontinue their business when a hard freeze destroyed the grape vines. Undaunted, they set out thousands of asparagus plants (above) and soon the family was employing laborers from St. Anne to harvest their thriving crops.

According to the plat layout from *The Kankakee County Atlas 1883* (above), the Bonvallet family was one of dozens of farmers who produced plentiful crops on fertile land that completely surrounded the Village of St. Anne. Farmers who chose to



During the last two decades of the 19th Century, real estate developers from Chicago platted land north of St. Anne that would become Wichert into small 10-, 20-, and 40-acre tracts that were offered for sale at \$50 an acre, with any amount accepted in down payment. They created dirt roads every mile, half-mile, and quarter-mile and had excavators dig drainage ditches (left), also called dredge ditches, where rain water and excess water from the soil were contained to be used to irrigate crops.

Dredge ditch after heavy rain; Photo by Fred Vander Meer

Dutch farmers, primarily from the Chicago suburbs of Roseland and South Holland, acquired the developed land and settled on small plots at the Palmer flag stop on the Chicago and Eastern Illinois Railroad. Initially, they built temporary homes on posts so the space below could be used as stables.

As time passed, these families built permanent homes; however, they did what they were used to doing in the Netherlands where land was in short supply. They constructed *narrow* homes because they thought they needed to *save space*.

In 1891, the settlers named their fledgling community Koster, after John Koster, one of the early residents.

The Dutch settlers were excellent farmers and hard-working people who put down strong roots in the soil and their crops flourished. They produced a variety of vegetables, including asparagus, tomatoes, cabbage, potatoes, sugar beets, onions, watermelons, muskmelons, pickles, sweet corn, pumpkins, and cucumbers. The farmers also grew field corn, soybeans, wheat, and rye in the rich soil.

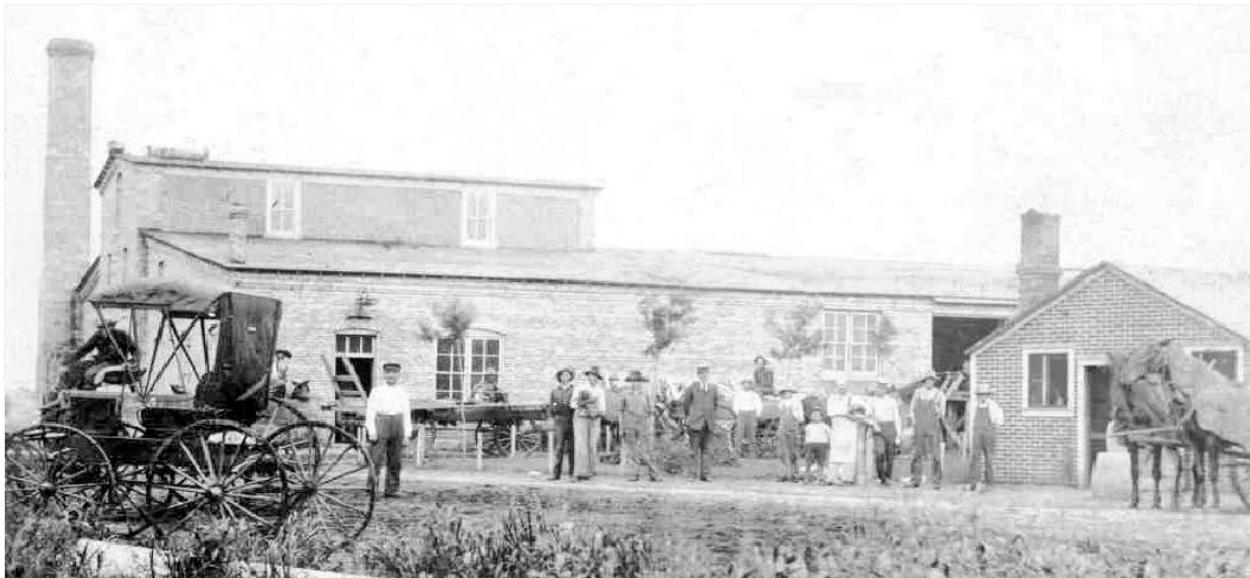
In 1892, a man from Chicago named Henry Wichert established the Wichert Pickle Works as a salting station for pickles raised by the farmers (right). In addition, facilities were constructed to accommodate operations where workers canned asparagus, produced sauerkraut from cabbage, and bottled catsup from tomatoes. They also prepared fresh vegetables for shipment to market.



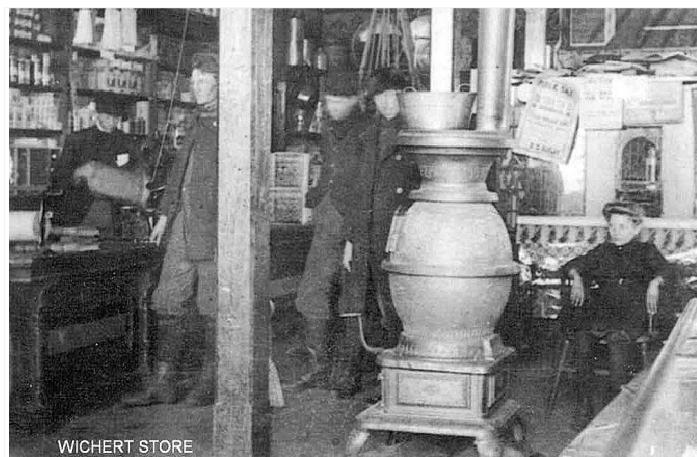
When the Central & Eastern Illinois Railroad constructed a depot (below) to facilitate the shipment of vegetables and products, they named the depot Wichert, after Henry Wichert.



The United States government designated a post office a year later, calling it the Wichert Post Office. The farmers decided to follow suit by changing the name of their community to Wichert. In 1912, they also changed the name of their church to the Reformed Church of Wichert.



Prior to and following World War I, increasing numbers of facilities and workers were required to process vegetables. To meet the needs of a growing number of workers, a thriving business district developed comprising grocery, merchandise, and dry goods stores; a barber shop; a poolroom; and eight to ten homes for personnel. Farms surrounded the businesses in every direction.



By the 1940's and 1950's, Wichert farmers were growing few vegetable crops as they shifted their focus to raising gladioli, or glads. They were so successful at raising glads, Wichert came to be known as the flower garden of the State of Illinois. During the growing season, the farmers cut the glads in the fields and brought them into a workroom in their barn or warehouse where they "bunched", or tied, the flowers into secure bundles of twelve each. Wholesalers picked up the bunched glads and delivered them to area markets. After the growing season ended in the fall, the farmers dug up and removed roots from the glad bulbs so they could be stored in the warehouses until spring when they were replanted.

Gladioli were raised and prepared for market at each farm; therefore, the factories in the business district where the farmers' vegetables were brought to be processed no longer were needed. In addition, workers who processed the vegetables (right) no longer had jobs or money to spend in the businesses.



Over time, the Wichert business district was phased out. The post office was closed decades ago and people now receive their mail by postal delivery through the St. Anne post office. Residents do their shopping in St. Anne, Kankakee, or at shopping centers close to Chicago.



When the business district was operating at its peak, numerous smokestacks rose into the sky (above). Only one smokestack remains today, on a dormant, boarded-up

building (right) that accommodated several enterprises through the years, including a factory where asparagus was canned.

Today, Wichert soil is as fertile as ever; however, farmers no longer raise and market gladioli because the cost of doing so has become prohibitive. Fields of glads have been replaced with acre upon acre of hybrid corn interspersed with grain crops.



A significant change in the life of the community occurred when most of the small farms operated by the Dutch farmers were supplanted by farms that were larger and/or operated by companies. With the transition, many young people who had worked on their small family farm or on neighboring farms had to leave Wichert to find work. In addition, young people who pursued a college education or a career other than farming often found there were no opportunities to work in their chosen profession in the Wichert area.

While the population of residents of Dutch descent is less today than in the past, a few descendants of the Dutch farmers who settled in Wichert a century or so ago, including members of our family, are working the fertile soil of their own farms or they live in nearby communities.